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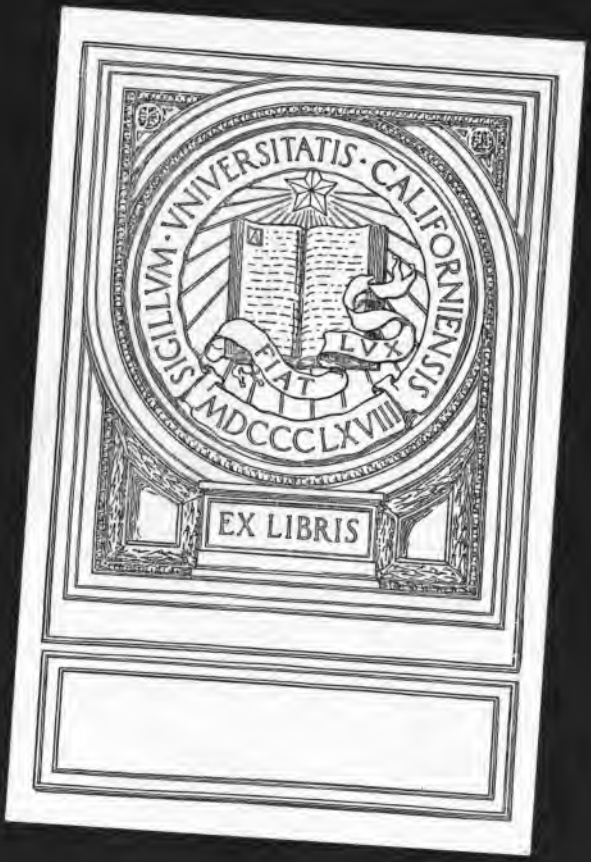
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WHO WAS

"JACK WILSON,"

THE

SINGER OF SHAKESPEARE'S STAGE?

AN ATTEMPT

TO PROVE THE IDENTITY OF THIS PERSON WITH

JOHN WILSON,

DOCTOR OF MUSICK, IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

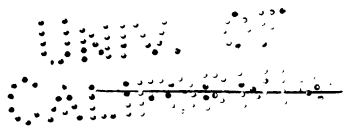
A.D. 1644.

BY

EDWARD F. RIMBAULT, L.L.D., F.S.A.,

MEMBER OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC IN STOCKHOLM,

ETC. ETC. ETC.



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WHO WAS JACK WILSON?

In the second volume of the "Shakespeare Society's Papers," Mr. Collier has communicated an article (p. 33.) upon "Jack Wilson," the performer of Balthazar in "Much ado about Nothing," and consequently the singer of the song in that play,

"Sigh no more ladies, sigh no more."

The fact of Wilson having performed the part of Balthazar, is clearly proved by the folio of 1623, where (Act ii. sc. 3.) the stage direction is "Enter Prince, Leonato, Claudio, and *Jack Wilson*," the name of the actor being inserted instead of that of the character. The object of Mr. Collier's paper is to prove that "Jack Wilson was not merely a singer but a composer, and in all probability the composer of "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more," as sung by him in the character of Balthazar." "He certainly was," continues Mr. Collier, "the composer of the song in "Measure for Measure," Act iv. sc. 1.

"Take, O! take those lips away," &c.

as is proved by a book of manuscript music, as old in some parts as the time of the Civil Wars, although

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in others it seems to have been written in the reign of Charles II. That song is there found with Wilson's name at the end of it, as the author of the music: unluckily the manuscript says nothing regarding the authorship of the words, or we might from thence have been able to decide by whom they were written. As it is, the case stands precisely thus: one stanza is found in Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure," while both are inserted in Beaumont and Fletcher's "Bloody Brother," Act v. sc. 2.; but on the other hand, both are imputed to Shakespeare in the edition of his poems, printed in 8vo. 1640. There is no doubt, however, that John Wilson was the composer of the song; and, as he certainly belonged to the company of players to which Shakespeare was attached, it may slightly strengthen the belief that one member of the association wrote the words of a song, to which another member wrote the music, especially when as far as we know, it was not Shakespeare's practice (though it was that of some dramatists of his time) to adopt into his plays, songs which had been written by others for other performances."

So far so good; Mr. Collier has adopted a favourite hypothesis of mine that Wilson was the composer of much of the music to Shakespeare's plays, but whether this can be established we shall see anon. The song in question, "Take, O! take those lips away," was certainly composed by a *John* Wilson, but by no less a personage than "Doctor John

Wilson, Professor of Musick, in the University of Oxford," A.D. 1644. My hypothesis therefore falls to the ground unless I can prove the identity of the Jack Wilson of Shakespeare's stage, with the learned Oxford professor of half a century later.

The manuscript from which Mr. Collier derived his information respecting the song in "Measure for Measure," was probably the common-place book of one of the Ferrers' family, at whose ancient seat of Staunton Harold, it was long preserved. It now forms one of the many musical rarities in my own collection. The song in question is there entered, but the name of the composer is *not* given at the end, as stated by Mr. Collier. The music, however, is undoubtedly Dr. Wilson's, and agrees with copies printed by John Playford in his "Select Musicall Ayres and Dialogues," 1652; the "Select Ayres," 1659; and the "Treasury of Musick," 1669.

John Wilson "the Composer," was a native of Feversham, in Kent, and born in the year 1594. Anthony à Wood tells us, "that having an early taste for music, he became one of the most eminent masters of that science." Nothing is known of him until the year 1626, when I find by an entry in the ancient cheque-book of the Chapel Royal, that he was constituted a "Gentleman of the Royal Chapel;" about the same time, according to Wood, he was also appointed "Musician in Ordinary," to his Majesty Charles I. "Being in constant attendance on his Majesty," says Wood, "he played on the lute with such skill, as gave the King great satis-

faction, who generally leaned on his shoulder during his performance." He was created Doctor of Music, in the University of Oxford, in 1644, at which time he appears to have taken up his residence in the University, for Wood says, " after the surrender of Oxford, [1646], he spent some years in the family of Sir William Walter, at Sarsden, in Oxfordshire." In 1656, at the request of Mr. Thomas Barlow, made to Dr. Owen, Vice-Chancellor of the University, who had been his pupil, he was constituted Music-Professor, and had lodging assigned him in Baliol College, where, being assisted by some of the Royalists, he lived very comfortably, exciting in the University, according to Wood, such a love of music, as in a great measure accounts for that flourishing state, in which it has long subsisted there, and for those numerous private music-meetings, of which this writer in his own life, has given such an amusing relation. At the Restoration, Dr. Wilson was appointed Chamber Musician to Charles II., and on the death of the famous Henry Lawes, in 1662, was again received into the Chapel Royal. Upon receiving the latter appointment, he quitted the University, and took up his residence in London. He died at his house near the Horse-ferry, Westminster, in 1673, at nearly seventy-nine years of age, and was buried in the little cloisters, adjoining Westminster Abbey.

This is all that is known of the life of one whom Wood says, was " the greatest judge of musick

that ever was," and "the best at the lute in all England," and if I can identify him with the famous singer of Shakespeare's day, it will add another laurel to the crown to which he is so justly entitled.

Wilson the composer was born, as I have stated, in 1594, and until the year 1626, a period of thirty-two years, we are entirely ignorant of any particulars concerning his life. It is during this period then, that we must look for his connection with the theatre.

Shakespeare's play, "Measure for Measure," according to Mr. Collier, was written either at the close of 1603, or in the beginning of 1604, at which period, Wilson was not more than ten years old. It is therefore impossible that he could have been the *original* composer of the song, "Take, O! take those lips away," although it is highly probable that he was the *original* singer. The stage direction, it will be remembered, is "enter Mariana and *Boy* singing."

The comedy of "Much ado about Nothing," was performed probably in the autumn of 1599, or certainly in the beginning of 1600; it is therefore still more unlikely that the music of Balthazar's song, could have been composed by the *boy* Wilson. He might indeed have composed the song at a later period, when (as we learn from the folio of 1623), he performed the character of Balthazar; but the composition is not found among his works which have descended to us.

From what has been said, it is clear that Jack Wilson was not the *original* composer of the two songs in question; but that he was an *early* composer, of one of them at least, is certain.

Wilson was the composer of four other Shakespearian lyrics, a fact unknown to Mr. Collier, when he wrote the article in the "Shakespeare Papers:" —"Where the bee sucks"—"Full fathom five"— "Lawn as white as driven snow"—and "From the fair Lavinian shore." They are all printed in the author's "Cheerfull Ayres or Ballads," Oxford, 1660. We have now evidence from this work, that Wilson was the *original* composer of the music to *one* of Shakespeare's plays. He says in his preface "some of these ayres were *originally* composed by those whose names are affixed to them, but are here placed as being *new set* by the author of the rest." The two songs, "Where the bee sucks," and "Full fathom five," have appended to them the name of "R. Johnson," who, upon this evidence, we may undoubtedly conclude was the *original* composer of the music in the play of the "Tempest." The song "Lawn as white as driven snow," from the "Winter's Tale," has the name of "John Wilson" attached to it, from which it is equally certain that he was its *original* composer. In my own mind, the circumstances connected with the Shakespearian lyrics in this book, are almost conclusive as to the identity of John Wilson the *composer*, with John Wilson the *singer*. Unless the composer had

been intimately acquainted with the theatre of Shakespeare's day, it is not likely that he would have remembered, so long after, the name of one of its composers. Nor is it likely, that being so well acquainted with the *original* composers of the Shakespearian drama, and so anxious as he appears to have been, to do justice to their memory, that he would have omitted informing us, who was the *original* composer of the song in the "Winter's Tale," had it been any other than himself. The "Winter's Tale" was not produced before 1610 or 1611, at which period Wilson was sixteen or seventeen years old, an age quite ripe enough for the production of the song in question.

From Wilson's particular mention of R. Johnson, one of the musicians of Shakespeare's company, it seems not too much to imagine that young Wilson may have been his pupil.

Robert Johnson was a celebrated performer on the lute; and if not so well known as his more fortunate contemporary, John Dowland, he at least deserves especial notice as one of the chief composers of the musical drama of Skakespeare's Stage. The first trace of Johnson's name occurs in the year 1573, when he was in the household of Sir Thomas Kytson of Hengrave Hall, in the County of Suffolk. In the book containing the expenses of the household, kept by one Thomas Fryer, I find under the date January 1573:—

"Paid to Robert the musician, as so much by

him paid for a coople staffe torches to alight my M^rs^ home on Candlemas night, supping at Mr. Townsends, ii s. vi d."

Again, under the date April 1575:—"In reward to Johnson, the musician, for his charges in awayting on my L. of Leycester, at Kennelworth, x s."

The last item is extremely interesting, and relates to an event which probably brought into request all the musical talent of the period—the grand entertainment given by the Earl of Leicester to Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle, and celebrated by Master Robert Laneham in his "Letter," and by Sir Walter Scott in his admirable romance of Kenilworth.

How long Johnson remained in the service of Sir Thomas Kytson, I have not been able to ascertain. He probably came to London soon after the Earl of Leicester's entertainment, and commenced his career as a composer for the theatre. In June 1611, I find him in the service of Prince Henry, receiving a stipend of 40*l*, annually; and on the 20th of December, 1625, his name occurs in a privy seal, exempting the musicians of the King (Charles I.) from the payment of subsidies.

Johnson composed the music for Middleton's play of the "Witch," a contemporary manuscript of which is in my possession. His music to the "Tempest," has shared the fatality which seems to attend almost everything in connexion with our

great bard; nevertheless I have been fortunate enough to recover some fragments of the instrumental music, which will be printed in my "Musical Illustrations of Shakespeare's Plays."

The last named Shakespearian lyric, connected with Wilson's music "From the fair Lavinian shore," is "Shakespeare's rime which he made at the Mytre in Fleete Streete,"—a fact which we learn from the manuscript collection of poetry, copied before the year 1631, and quoted in Mr. Collier's "Annals of the Stage," Vol. iii. p. 276.

I shall here quote an anecdote from the Lestrange MS. (Harl. MS. No. 6395) which goes far to prove the identity of the learned Doctor, with the Jack Wilson of Shakespeare's stage, who, though dubbed by the learned, was still "Jack" with his familiars.

"Jack Willson and Harry and Will. Lawes were at a taverne one night. Wilson being in worst case of the three, swore he would quarrell with the next man he mett, who was a meere stranger, and a sober gentleman; whom he thus accosted, 'Are you not a Catholicke?' 'Yes marry am I.' 'Then y're a knave,' sayes he. The gentleman having pass't by a little way, stepps backe to him, and bids him not swallow an error, 'for,' sayes he, 'I am no Catholicke!' 'Why then, y're a scurvy lying knave,' sayes Willson. Upon that out flew their swords, but the Lawes' parted them presently."

Dr. Wilson was a man of facetious temper; and

styled by Wood "a great humorist, and a pretender to buffoonery." Henry Lawes, one of his companions in the present drunken frolic, has given a much more amiable, and probably a truer portrait of him in the following lines, part of a poem prefixed to Wilson's "Psalterium Carolinum," 1657—

> "From long acquaintance and experience, I
> Could tell the world thy known integrity
> Unto thy friend; thy true and honest heart,
> Ev'n mind, good nature, all but thy great art,
> Which I but dully understand."

This is good evidence, coming from one so celebrated as "Harry Lawes," of Wilson's character, as well as a type of the high estimation in which his musical abilities were held by his professional brethren. Respecting the latter, Dr. Burney has most unjustly pronounced that Wilson "set words to music more clumsily than any composer of equal rank in the profession;" but he afterwards admits that he "was respected by his cotemporaries, and held an exalted rank in his art."

The work (before mentioned) containing the Shakespearian lyrics is of such interest that I subjoin its description. It is entitled "Cheerfull Ayres or Ballads. First composed for one single voice, and since set for three voices. By John Wilson, Dr. in Musick, Professor of the same in the University of Oxford. Oxford, Printed by W. Hall, for Ric. Davis, Anno Dom. 1660." Eight copies of verses with the following initials of the writers at the end, E. D., A. C., N. M., R. R., and J. H. O. C. The

latter speaks of some of the ayres having been performed at Court before the King, and concludes in the following manner:

" I do not wonder that the King did call,
Wilson, there's more words, let's heare them all:
Such was your skill, that what the rest o' the Court,
Perhaps thought long, judicious ears thought short.
Excellent Artist! whose sweet strains devour,
Time swift as they, and make days seem an hour.
But what need more, since 'tis enough to tell
But this; King Charles hath heard, and lik'd them well."

The songs contained in this collection (69 in number) are as follows:—

When Troy towne for ten years war.
From the faire Lavinian shore.
Will you buy any honesty.
Full fathome five.
Where the bee sucks.
When love with unconfined wings.
Have you any work for a sow gelder.
Come hither you that love.
Young Thirsis lay in Phillis' lap.
Kawasha comes in majestie.
Cast your capps and cares away.
Doe not feare to put thy feet.
Thoughts doe not vex me.
Whoso complaineth gaineth.
Come, silent night.
Come, constant hearts.
Love and disdain.
In a season all oppressed.
Cupid, thou art a wanton boy.
Though your strangenesse.
Ask me no more.

Clora's false love made Cloris weep.
I love, alas, but cannot shew it:
If I die be this my will.
Greedy lover pause awhile.
Thine eyes to me like sunnes.
Awake, awake, the morne.
I would have thee merry.
In the merry month of May.
Faine would I, Cloris.
Deere give me a thousand kisses.
Lawne as white as driven snow.
Goe weather beaten thoughts.
Goe restlesse thoughts.
If my lady bid beginne.
Tell me where the beauty lyes.
Boast not, blind boy.
Come thou father of the spring.
Sir, this my little mistresse here.
No, no, I tell thee no.
For ever let thy heavenly tapers.
Fly hence, shadows.
Since love hath in thine and mine.
Since love hath bought thee.
Yon herauld of my mistresse heart.
Why think'st thou foole,
When the cleer sunn.
What would any man desire?
Thou that excellest.
I swear by muskadell.
Fondnesse of man to love.
Downe, be still, you seas.
You say you love me.
Hence with this wedlock chaine.
So have I seen a silver swann.
View'st thou that poore penurious payre.
If I must tell you what I love.
When on mine eyes.

Be not thou so foolish nice.
Come, I faint.
God Lycus ever young.
Nor roses coucht within a lilly bed.
So many lovers have I neglected.
Now the lusty spring is seen.
Wherefore peep'st thou envious day.
Turne thy beauteous face away.
When I behold my Mistres face
My love and I for kisses plaid.
In a vale with flowrets spangled.

From the above list it is evident that Dr. Wilson was intimately acquainted with the works of the poets of the time of James I., Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Breton, &c. a further proof of the correctness of my position. Many other of Wilson's compositions (and also some of those printed in the above collection) are to be found in the following rare musical works, all of which are in my library:—"Catch that catch can," 1652; "Select Musicall Ayres and Dialogues," 1652; "Select Ayres and Dialogues, 1659; "The Musical Companion," 1667; "The Treasury of Musick," 1669, &c.

Upon a careful consideration of the various circumstances adduced in the course of this paper, I cannot but consider that my position is pretty clearly established. The Doctor's settings of the Shakespearian Lyrics – his knowledge of the original composer of the music in the "Tempest"—his companionship with the great dramatic composers,

the two Lawes's—his familiar appellation of "Jack Wilson"—and, above all, the thirty-two years gap in the early history of his life, all these circumstances combined are evidences not to be slighted, and, until these evidences can be set aside by something more conclusive, I shall rest satisfied in my own mind, that "Jack Wilson," the singer of Shakespeare's stage, and Doctor John Wilson, the learned Professor of the University of Oxford, were one and the same person.

THE END.

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